

*J. H. Sullivan  
Presented by the author-*

ROBERT BURNS:

VINDICATED.

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BY

REV. ROBERT GRANT.

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"The short but simple annals of the poor."—*Grant.*

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HALIFAX:

NOVA SCOTIA PRINTING COMPANY.

1883.

Rev. R. Grand a native of  
Piedmont County spent most of his  
life in this County.

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INTRODUCTIONS.

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**P**URING a period of forty years, it has been the conviction of the undersigned, that Burns never had a superior, as one of *Nature's Prodigies*. And to prove that such a belief is not totally unfounded, is the design of the following pages.

ROBERT GRANT.

GREAT VILLAGE, }  
February 6th, 1883. }

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## ROBERT BURNS.

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Every tree is known by its fruit, and every region by the productions of its soil. Who would think of scaling the summit of "hoary Alpine Hills," or traversing the wastes of Siberia to ascertain if the "tender grape appeared?" It would also be a fruitless peregrination to explore the coasts of Greenland with a view to behold the "pomegranates budding forth." In Africa, burning sands appear and sickly plants abound. In Nova Scotia, the hardy mayflower "blooms amidst the snow." Ireland is proud of its shamrock; Scotland of its thistle, and England of its rose. And when the tyrants of Russia have been consigned to oblivion, the banks of the Wolga and of the Don will be clothed with a rich harvest of "yellow corn." What is true of the dry land is equally true of the "Watery Main." Who has not heard of Labrador herring, and of Loch Fine haddock? Who has not read of that—

"Some place far abroad,  
Where sailors gang to fish for cod."

It thus appears that in the material world,—

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
The dark unfathomed caves of Ocean bear."

It is also equally true that similar phenomena abound in the realms of thought. Greece had its Homer; Italy had its Virgil; France had its Tully, its Fenelon, its Voltaire, and its Lamartine; Spain had its Cervantes, and Germany its Luther. Even afflicted Ireland can recount its intellectual gladiators, and number among its sons such names as a St. Patrick, a Grattan, a Curran, a Plunket, a Moore, an O'Connell, and a Sheil. Scotland has ever been true to her national motto, and, in spite of all the sneers hurled at herself and her sons, from the days of a Samuel Johnson down to the times of an S. G. W. Archibald, a Uniacke, and a Howe, she produced a John Knox, a George



Buchanan, a James Thomson, a Thomas Campbell, an Allan Ramsay, an Ettrick Shepperd, and a Sir Walter Scott—not to speak of her Wallace and her Bruce, her Sir Ralph Abercrombie, her Sir John Moore, her Napiers, and her Sir Colin Campbell. The names of a Richard the *third*, a Henry the *eighth*, a Charles the *second*, and a George the *fourth*, shall ever be remembered with execration; but England will ever be proud of the fame of a Chaucer, a Spencer, a Shakspeare, a Milton, a Watts, a Cowper, a Dryden, and a Pope.

It can thus be proved that there never has been a nation but has produced its distinguished men. Even the distant China can boast of a Confucius, and Persia of a Zoroaster.

This brings me back to a period 124 years ago (1759). In the month of January of that year, in one of the poorest huts in Scotland, and within two miles of the town of Ayr—that

“Old Ayr which ne’er a town surpasses”—

was born one whose name, especially during the last sixty years, has stood prominent among the children of men. I mean ROBERT BURNS. And whatever others say, or may have said, I say, all honour to the name. He was born in the deepest depths of poverty. He was cradled in obscurity, and “when he was come to years, he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.” The early choice of Robert Burns was as deliberate as that of Moses himself. Of the latter, it is recorded that his choice was to “suffer affliction with the people of God.” The choice of the peasant poet was equally disinterested, and creditable to his generous nature. In early boyhood he found himself in the ranks of those whom ages of grinding tyranny and oppression had reduced to a state only a little better than that of slaves. When he attained to the full maturity of his strength, like Goldsmith’s Village Pastor,

“He neither changed, nor wished to change his place.”

His youthful resolve thus was to stand by that rank in lowly life from which he sprang at first, and, throughout his whole career, he acted up to that choice in a manner that has seldom been equalled, and perhaps never surpassed by any uninspired man. The strictures of adverse critics, both lay and clerical, to the contrary notwithstanding. During his brief but difficult career of only thirty-seven years, with courage more than human,

he withstood the pitiless peltings of the "proud man's scorn and the rich man's contumely;" and though "sore with hardship pressed," he threw the shield of his protection over down-trodden and oppressed poverty. The virtuous, though unlettered poor, he claimed as his own—his peculiar charge. But, like a skillful general, he "carried the war into Africa"—as every would-be despot of his own and every succeeding age felt, and shall yet feel to his cost. Against the brazen forehead of every purse-proud oppressor, with unerring aim and deadly force, he hurled the shafts of remorseless satire and vengeful sarcasm. The consequence is, that those in lowly life feel that, in the person of Robert Burns, as well as a Cowper and a Watts, there appeared a friend and a deliverer. The Ayr-shire peasant had more than the ambitious Edward in view when he uttered the battle-cry,—

"Lay the proud usurpers low,"  
"Tyrants fall in every foe."

And lordly oppressors in every land would do well to take heed. Had they done so years ago, their own best interests would have been promoted, and much misery and bloodshed would have been averted,

I shall now consider—

I.—The position Burns is entitled to occupy *as a Poet*.

In commercial affairs there is a recognised standard of weights and measures. This is, no doubt, true of all nations. But, where is the standard of criticism to be found? Is it in the *ipse dixit* of this and that other reviewer? I say it is not. A nice standard we would then have. In English history there was an Addison, a Steel, a Johnson, and a Burke, a Hume, a Macaulay, a Lockart, a Wilson, and a Carlyle. Every one of these sons of genius was a consummate master of style; and they all, by their writings, acquired imperishable fame. But I wonder if it ever occurred to any one that no two of them ever thought or wrote alike; that, with the exception of Addison alone, whose style was faultless, every one of them, at times, infringed the laws of propriety and good taste, both in thought and diction? A Johnson could be both turgid and pompous. A Macauley could be, and often is laboured, bombastic, and untruthful. Even Homer sometimes "nods." This being so, we must go to some other quarter for the laws of infallibility as to style. In

reply, therefore, to the sneers of a Moore, a Maginn, and a Carlyle, together with all their admirers, I take my stand within the citadel of Revelation, and affirm that the great God, who formed the mind of man—who exercised the right of thought from eternity—must be considered the best judge as to what constitutes accuracy of thought and propriety of style. Where then are we the most likely to find the best models of composition? Is it not in the writings of those men whom God taught by his own spirit—those “holy men who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost?” But these “holy men” also *wrote*. And they did so influenced by the teaching of Him who only is perfect. Therefore, whatever mere worldings may say, I affirm that the author, whose mental habits and modes of expression come the nearest to the Bible, comes the nearest to perfection.

Among critics it has been customary to assign to Burns a mere *secondary* rank among the poetic race. The Shakspeares, the Miltons, the Drydens, and the Popes, are represented as central suns, and Burns as either a satellite or a fixed star of the second or third magnitude. Tried by the rules of *human* criticism, this may have been so. But, as already stated, there is a higher standard—one to which the loftiest intellects must bow. The human mind was never formed even by a Jeffrey, a Brougham, or a Sidney Smith. Christopher North himself was not entrusted with the making of the laws of thought. And, when Edinburgh reviews, and all the magazines of a Blackwood and a Harper have become “moth-eaten,” the unlettered pages of a Peter, a James, and a John, will be read with delight, and command the admiration of ransomed millions, until suns shall shine and moons shall “wax and wane no more.”

Such is the superiority of the Bible—no matter by whom written—whether by the fishermen of Galilee or by the herdsman of Tekoa. And, because Burns received so much of his inspiration from that “holy book divine,” he thought and wrote as no other uninspired man ever thought or wrote.

But it will be said, do you mean to represent Burns as equal to the Thomsons, the Campbells, the Miltons, and the Shakspeares? My reply is, that I do, and that, in some respects, he was a greater prodigy than any of them. I also maintain that the standard of criticism, that would assign to Burns a rank inferior to *any man that ever lived*, would make a Livy and a



Tacitus better historians than Moses, which they never were. Napoleon would then be a greater general than David and Joshua, which he never was. Virgil and Homer would be better and greater poets than the Psalmist. Lord Bacon would then be a greater philosopher than Solomon. Dugald Stewart would be a profounder reasoner than Paul, and, to cap the climax of absurdity and profanity, Chalmers would be a greater preacher than Christ. His astronomical discourses would be superior to Christ's sermon on the mount, or Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. For Lord Bacon's writings were incomparably more voluminous and abstruse than the writings of Solomon. Dugald Stewart wrote more elaborately, and with greater pretensions to scholarship than ever Paul did. And Chalmers's style was immeasurably more stately and grandiloquent than the Saviour's—just as a Shakspeare, a Milton, and a Byron are, *in appearance*,—but *only* in appearance, superior to Burns.

II.—Facts to *prove*, Burns' matchless pre-eminence.

1. With the exception of the "*Bards of the Bible*," the productions of no other poet ever took such hold of the *popular mind*.

"Paradise Lost" commands the admiration of the learned. It is the delight of the lettered recluse. The sayings of Shakspeare are the favourite theme, and are well adapted to the mental habits of fashionable life, party chiefs, the scions of nobility and royalty, military officers, and the like. So, also, with the characters of a Homer and a Virgil. Hector and Achilles, Ajax and Nestor, with Aeneas, Turnus, and Agamemnon, are represented as demigods. But who and what were they when compared with the tens of thousands composing the armed hosts of Greece and Troy? I say that, both by Homer and Virgil, the valour and true nobility of the private soldier are not recognised at all. Was this fair? Was this the way that Burns treated the rank and file of Bruce's army at the battle of Bannockburn? No, it was not; and it was not the way Sir Walter Scott, and even Byron, treated the private soldiers who fought and gained the battle of Waterloo.

The same objection applies to all the poetic labors of Milton and Shakspeare. The former does ample justice to the greatness of Satan and all his "apostate crew." The latter favours

us with gorgeous descriptions of the many accomplishments of his Hamlets, Romeos and Juliets, his Julius Cæsars, his Buckingham and Macbeths. He narrates the warlike achievements of a Warwick, a Richard the Third, and a Henry the Fifth, &c. But who were there, and what did they signify, when compared with the millions inhabiting England, Scotland, Ireland, and Denmark? It thus appears that your boasted Shakspeare could do ample justice to the great qualities of

"Kings and belted knights,  
A marquis, duke, and a' that."

But I ask his admirers, how did he treat the common people? It can be proved that, as a general rule, he either ignored their existence altogether, or held them up to ridicule and contempt. To some extent, it was also thus with Sir Walter Scott. He sings the savage customs of our forefathers in the days of Prince Charlie and James the Fourth, with the senseless festivities of Holyrood and Norham Castle, with the horrors of border chivalry; Campbell wrote the "Mariners of England." Thomson, in his "Seasons," presents all nature arrayed in her loveliest hues. But did the most gifted of them ever produce anything to surpass Burns' "Vision," "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "Mary in Heaven," or "Man was Made to Mourn"? I say they never did.

Where is the poet whose strains have been so responded to by the common people? All honour to the names of Cowper and Watts. Of their poetry it is only fair to assert that it is perfection itself:

"Their Pilgrim marks the road,  
And guides the progress of the soul to God."

In the "Seasons" and the "Pleasures of Hope" the works of nature appear more lovely, and the perfections of Deity more resplendent. But what I maintain is this,—the colours in which Burns depicts the scenery of his native land are of a *deeper dye*, of a *richer hue*,—the strains in which he sings the joys, the griefs, the hopes of human life, are of a *higher order*, they have more of the *seraphic* than the strains of any other poet that ever lived, just as a Reubens or a Vandyke could produce one painting so exquisitely superior as to out-distance and render abortive the efforts of all competitors. So with Burns. Actuated by the inspiration of the moment, he

embodied his thoughts in verse. And the idea of equalling or excelling them has never yet entered the mind of man.

2. Burns' *poverty* and all the surroundings of his lot in life furnish another proof of his greatness.

Take such men as Milton, Dryden, Campbell or Sir Walter Scott. Every one of them had the benefit of a thorough classical education. In the Universities of England and Scotland, for years, they mingled freely with associates distinguished for their literary, philosophical and scholastic attainments. In the masterpieces of a Horace, an Ovid, a Hesiod, a Socrates, a Seneca and a Plato they would find the laws of thought and the unfading beauties of style illustrated in the most captivating terms. Their daily intercourse with minds enriched and refined by education would necessarily beget, in their own souls, aspirations after intellectual and literary fame. They also possessed the benefit to be derived from foreign travel. They visited "the Continent" and would there have for their associates men who had drunk at that spring where

"Shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,  
But drink largely sobers it again."

About 100 years ago some English writer laid it down as an axiom that

"The man who's destined by the muse  
To charm with verse some future age,  
Should early have his bosom fired  
With Virgil's or great Homer's rage."

In the person of Robert Burns this rule was reversed. There is no evidence that he knew anything of these distinguished men but the name, when his own "verses" began to "charm" the community in which he lived. By the time he was 25 he not only "charmed" but astonished the most eminent literati of the day. And now, after the lapse of 97 years, it may be said in his own words that

"Time but the impression deeper makes,  
As streams their channels deeper wear."

Among his earliest compositions was "The Cottar's Saturday Night," a poem the merits of which, even if he had never written anything else, are such as to render his name immortal. Before he was 28 he went fresh from the plough to Edinburgh.

This was in the days of such men as Blair, Hume, Robertson and Dugald Stewart. With nothing to recommend him but his own native greatness, he excited the astonishment of these distinguished men, took the capital of Scotland by surprise, and walked its streets as a prodigy.

Now, up to this time, what had been Burns' opportunities? Education the most limited. Hard—the very hardest labour, all day. The coarsest and scantiest clothes to wear, the coarsest and scantiest food to eat, with none to associate with whose society might conduce to originate and foster any elevated train of thought. All around him bore the traces of pinching poverty. So far as his prospects in life were concerned, all before him was the "blackness of darkness." It therefore required something bordering on the preternatural for one so situated to produce anything either in prose or verse that would command the admiration of succeeding generations.

In any county in Nova Scotia where is the youth a stranger to the refinements of education, inured all day to the severest manual toil, borne down by the most abject poverty, that could still give expression to his thoughts in words that so "breathed and burned" that such judges as a Sir William Young, a Sir John A. Macdonald, or a Sir Charles Tupper of the present; the George R. Youngs, or the Howes, the Johnstons and the Haliburtons of the past, could read with admiration and wonder?

3. *The intrinsic merits of Burns' Works* are such as to attest the superiority and vastness of his genius.

As far as it goes, "Tam O'Shanter" will bear a comparison with anything in Shakspeare. In "The Vision" and in "The Cottar's Saturday Night" there are passages that can afford to be placed side by side with anything in "Paradise Lost" or "Paradise Regained." Within the whole range of English literature where is the poem that contained more drollery than "The Jolly Beggars" or the tale of "The Twa Dogs;" of genius and ability the most stupendous than is exhibited in the "Brigs of Ayr," "The Vision," or "Man was Made to Mourn?" I ask if, in *any* language, ancient or modern, there is anything inspired by such profound and formidable love of country as "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace Bled," and the last eighteen lines of "The Cottar's Saturday

Night?" or profounder *piety* than is contained in his version of some of the Psalms of David, or his "Prayer in the Prospect of Death?" What can be wiser or more philosophic than his "Letter to a Friend?" I am well aware that that "Prayer" has been represented as containing the very essence of heresy. If there is heresy in it, all I can say is that I could never see it.

But it will be objected that Burns wrote only *short* sketches. To this I reply that the Psalmist did the same. Besides, the *length* of a poem does not constitute its excellence, just as the superiority of a painting does not depend on its *size*. Neither is the strength of a man proved by the *number* of his muscular performances. Any *one* of Samson's feats would have been enough to prove that he was "more than mortal strong," and that in him, Achilles would have found his match. We must also bear in mind that Burns *died young*—at the age of 37 years and 6 months. Had Horace, Virgil, or Homer died at that age, the "Arts Poetica," the "Æneid" and the "Illiad" would never have been written. Had Shakespeare died at that age, few of his plays would ever have been heard of. The same may be affirmed of every one of the other English poets with the exception of Byron alone. And had Burns lived 20 years more, who knows to what unknown realms of thought and "worlds remote" his genius would have led him? This we *do* know, however, that for some time previous to his death he had it in contemplation to write a poem of greater magnitude and compass than any of his previous performances.

4. The *unanimous consent of mankind* is an evidence of Burns' superiority.

His transcendent merits have been recognized and acknowledged all the world over, not only by the intellectual multitude for whose benefit he composed his masterpieces, but by the ablest of critics and reviewers. They have been translated into all the continental languages of modern Europe, and in all English-speaking lands,—in the United States, in the Dominion of Canada, in Australia, in different parts of Africa, in New Zealand, on the banks of the Ganges, and many other places, he is read, admired and loved, and his memory is revered more than any other poet that England, Scotland or Ireland ever produced.



It is thus evident that, tried by all the rules of criticism, Burns' merits were of the first order. They were recognized by Byron, Jeffrey, Brougham, Professor Wilson, Lockhart, and all the other eminent men of letters of the 19th century. Even the snarling and detestable Carlyle, who was abundantly backward in bestowing praise on the writings of any except his own, was compelled to own the sterling merits of Burns. With the exception of a few indiscreet expressions, amounting to no more than 20 or 30 in all his works, it may be said of him that, whatever he did, he did it *so well* that it could not be done better. And in painting, drawing, sculpture, statuary and architecture, as well as in poetry, this is the best criterion of excellence and success. With respect to his songs—209 in number—it is claimed that they are absolutely faultless. By a competent judge it has been said that the "Charm and power of Burns' poetry consist in the justness of the feelings expressed, and in the truthfulness and freshness which it derives from nature; and that seldom, if ever, have such manliness, tenderness and passion been expressed as in his songs."

There is also abundant evidence that the effusions of his muse have been productive of *good*. His "Death and Dr. Hornbook" has ever been the terror of the medical quack. His "Address to the Unco Guid" has laid bare the hollow pretensions of the self-righteous hypocrite. And the lash of his satire in "The Ordination," "The Two Herds," and even "The Holy Fair" has often humbled the vanity of many a clerical fop. There is also reason to believe that his sublime effusions in defence of freedom have often fired the soul and imparted irresistible might to the arm of the patriot. It is doubtful if British arms would have been so successful in the days of Sir Ralph Abercrombie, Sir John Moore and the Duke of Wellington, were it not for Burns' "Scots Wha Hae." On a June morning, 67 years ago, there were drawn out, on two opposing eminences, the British forces under Wellington and the veterans of France under Bonaparte. Is it not natural to suppose that the Iron Duke, as he surveyed the serried ranks of his foe, would think of the words:

"See the front of battle lower,  
See approach proud Edward's power."

And when, on the afternoon of that day, when the Scotch Grays, with the ringing cheer, "Hurrah for Scotland," went

crash through the French Cuirassiers, it is almost morally certain that many of them would have these words ringing in their ears :

“ Wha for Scotland’s king and law,  
Freedom’s sword will strongly draw,  
Lay the proud usurpers low,  
Tyrants fall in every foe;  
Liberty’s in every blow,  
Forward, let us do or die.”

They did go forward, and all the world knows the result.

But Burns has been accused of hostility to religion, especially to the clergy. The accusation is untrue. It is well known that he was on the best terms with many of the clergy of the day. It is undeniable that he held up a *certain class* of the clergy to ridicule. So did Christ the Scribes and Pharisees. But it was not religion, it was the *caricature* of religion that Burns exposed. It is a historical fact, a fact well known by Burns’ vilifiers, that true piety was never at a lower ebb in the Church of Scotland than in his day. When, therefore, one of his keen penetration would see and hear men bearing the name of Ambassadors of Christ preach and pray as if the Deity took special delight in the sufferings of men, he would be much tempted to gratify his powers of satire and sarcasm at their expense. But if anyone wishes to see *clerical hirelings* lashed, let him turn up the “Progress of Error,” by Cowper. Did Burns write anything severer than this ?

“ He from Italian songsters takes his cue,  
Set Paul to music, he will quote him too.  
Himself a wanderer from the narrow way,  
His silly sheep, what wonder if they stray,  
Will not the sickliest sheep of every flock  
Resort to his example as a rock ;  
Strike up the fiddles, let us all be gay,  
Laymen have leave to dance, if parsons play.”

If Burns chastised a certain class of the clergy “with whips,” Cowper “chastised them with scorpions.”

Burns’ *drinking habits*. This is a subject in reference to which there has been too much said. One of the most violent of Burns’ assailants, on this score, was the celebrated George Gilfillan. (See his work entitled, “Martyrs and Heroes of the Covenant”). Now, it so happens that that book was not a hundred years old when Rev. George Gilfillan had to mount

the cutty stool himself, and do penance for *his own* drinking habits. That Burns, at times, drank to excess has never been denied. He often, with shame and sorrow, confessed this himself. But it can be proved by contemporary evidence that he was *habitually* a man of temperate habits, and that occasional excesses were the *exception*. He was the *lion* of his day. His company was much sought after by strangers from a distance, as well as by friends in his vicinity, and the custom of the day was to repair to some adjacent tavern for social enjoyment. On such occasions, Burns, no doubt, occasionally forgot himself. But in those days, not only in Scotland, but in Nova Scotia, and both by clergy and laity, drinking, up to the verge of intoxication, was not considered immoral. It is also well known that ardent spirits were considered one of the necessities of life. This was long before temperance societies were heard of. The humble cottage of the unlettered bard was too much frequented by those whom his fame had attracted from afar, encroaching seriously on his valuable time, besides subjecting him to unnecessary temptation. It is also a well-known physiological fact that some can drink to excess and not be intoxicated. Their coarser nature is not easily overcome by strong drink. There is reason to believe that it was the opposite of this with Burns, that his physical system was so finely strung as to render him peculiarly susceptible to the effects of the intoxicating cup. One thing, however, is true, and he is entitled to the benefit of it. He was a faithful husband and the most loving of fathers. "Poor fellow, he never, at any time, said a harsh or unkind word to me." This was the testimony of his wife some considerable time after the commencement of her widowhood.

Burns has also been subjected to the charge of *imprudence*. One thing is certain—he was a married man with a family. His income was, for some years, twenty-eight dollars. Latterly it swelled up to the fabulous sum of two hundred and eighty dollars per annum. But he *was never in debt*. In his writings he unsparingly lashed some of the prominent men of the day. But neither Dr. Hornbook nor Holy Willie, nor any of the "Dramatis Personæ" in the Holy Fair prosecuted him for libel. Shakspeare, at the very commencement of his career, laid himself open to a *double* prosecution—one for stealing, another for a libellous poem. Said the late Geo. R. Young, when his heart was broken by the ingratitude of traitors, "I may say a stupid

thing, but catch me doing a stupid thing.\* So with Burns. He was guilty of his indiscretions. If so, he was aware of it himself, and nobly did he atone for them. Whatever his aberrations were, there is some evidence that he was a penitent. He, no doubt, said and wrote what had better been unsaid and unwritten. But, by all means, let those that are "without sin cast the first stone at him."

The last few weeks of his life he knew that his days were nearly ended. And, at that solemn period, his health gone, and deserted by men, he "girded up his loins," knowing well what was before him. He sent abroad no wailing cry for help. In the prospect of death he displayed fully as much equanimity as John Knox did. Unlike Sir Walter Scott, he did not ask any one to "read to him out of *the Book*." He performed that office for himself. Sankey and Bliss had not, as yet, appeared on the horizon. If they had, the expiring Burns would have hailed their advent with raptures. And, while reviewing the past, surveying the present, or anticipating the future, with what ecstatic joy would he sing, "There is a gate ajar?" With what seraphic might would his manly voice join in the strain,—

"Jesus paid it all,  
All to him I owe,  
Sin had left a crimson stain,  
He washed it white as snow."

"And, when from my dying bed,  
My ransomed soul shall rise,  
Jesus paid it all,  
Shall rend the vaulted skies."

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\*These words were addressed by Mr. Y. to the writer not long previous to his death. Geo. R. Young may not have been the Robert Burns of Nova Scotia, in the poetic line. But he possessed not a few of Burns's manly qualities. In one respect, they resembled each other. Their sterling merits were recognized when it was too late.